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24 Aemilia Lanyer, “The Description of Cooke-ham” (1611)

Abstract: This chapter considers the writing of Aemilia Lanyer, with a particular focus on “The Description of Cooke-ham”, published as the concluding part of her work *Salve Deus Rex Iudæorum* (1611). As an example of estate and country house poetry, as well as a reflection on patronage, the poem is an expression of the speaker’s ambivalent attitude towards the arbitrariness of social status and societal hierarchies; at the same time, it reflects on the close connections between human beings and nature. The following analysis also shows how “The Description of Cooke-ham” is linked to the overall work *Salve Deus Rex Iudæorum* on the basis of biblical typology and symbolism. The conclusion of the chapter offers an overview of critical approaches and readings of a poem that began to be considered in literary criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Country house poetry, literary patronage, typology, gender

1 Context: Author, Œuvre, Moment

Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645) is known today for her poetry, published in 1611 and written presumably a few years earlier: *Salve Deus Rex Iudæorum* (“Hail, God, King of the Jews”; Woods 2002). Lanyer was the daughter of Baptista Bassano, a Christianized Jew from Venice and member of the Queen’s Music, and Margaret Johnson; her christening is documented to have taken place at St. Botolph, Bishopsgate, on January 27, 1569 (Woods 1993, xv–xvi). After her father’s death in 1576, she appears to have spent time with Susan Bertie, the Dowager Countess of Kent, whom she describes in one of her dedicatory poems as “the Mistris of my youth” (Lanyer 1993, 18, l. 1). In 1592, she married Alfonso Lanyer, a court musician. The marriage was brought about after her becoming pregnant as the mistress of Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon, the queen’s first cousin as well as Lord Chamberlain and the future patron of the company of actors to which Shakespeare belonged (Prior 2003, 22). Details of Lanyer’s life were documented by the astrologer Simon Forman, whom Lanyer had been consulting for a few months in 1597, asking him, among other things, about her husband’s and her own fortune (“wher he shall Com to Any p^{r}ferment before he com’ hom Again or no” (Forman 2019, CASE1893); “Wher she shall be A Ladi” (CASE2434). His casebook contains the first instances of medical documentation ever, among them details of his conversations with Lanyer that are, however, “filtered by [his] [...] increasing interest in her as a possible

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sexual partner" (Woods 1993, xix). She appears to have stopped seeing him after refusing his sexual advances.

Lanyer had two children: Henry, born in 1593, who lived into adulthood (d. 1633), and Odillya, born in 1598, who died at the age of ten months. The marriage with Alfonso Lanyer is supposed to have been unhappy (Woods 1993, xviii); it ended with his death in 1613. From that time, Lanyer's financially strained situation seems to have worsened. She quarrelled with her brothers-in-law over a hay and grain patent that Alfonso had obtained from James I in 1604. In 1617, she founded a school in St. Giles in the Field, but her residence there ended after two years and with another lawsuit over rent and repairs (xxvii–xxviii). Aemilia Lanyer lived with her son's family, i.e. his wife and two grandchildren, until her death in 1645.

Critical interest in her work began in the 1970s, when A. L. Rowse assumed Lanyer to be the 'dark lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets (Rowse 1973; ↗ 22 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*). He published an edition of her work titled *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* (see Grossman 1998, 1; Herz 1997, 125–26). This assumption is, however, based on speculation. Susanne Woods subsequently edited Lanyer's poetry in 1993 in the series "Women Writers in English 1350–1850." Another edition of Lanyer's work, by Diane Purkiss, appeared a year later, in a joint publication with the plays of Elizabeth Cary (Purkiss 1994).

Salve Deus Rex Iudæorum was printed in 1611 by Valentine Simmes for Richard Bonian; two impressions exist of which nine copies survive, six from the second impression (Grossman 1998, 1). One of the extant copies at the Victoria and Albert Museum is a presentation copy to Prince Henry (the oldest son of James I): it "is beautifully printed and bound with the Prince's coat of arms on the cover" (Woods 1993, xlviii).

The title page contains an acknowledgement of her social status as a married woman: Lanyer introduces herself as "Wife to Captaine *Alfonso Lanyer* Servant to the Kings Majestie" (Lanyer 1993, 1, emphasis original), which has been read as a sign of her obedience as well as the license to "speak outside the household" (Woods 1993, xxxi). It furthermore states the content as follows: "1. The Passion of Christ. 2. Eves Apologie in defence of Women. 3. The Teares of the Daughters of Jerusalem. 4. The Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Marie, with divers other things not unfit to be read" (Lanyer 1993, 1). This suggests four separate texts, while these four parts actually make up the whole of the poem (Grossman 1998, 2). The "other things" mentioned here include a number of paratexts, among them various dedications, most of them in poetry, to noblewomen (beginning with Queen Anne, followed by Princess Elizabeth, a poem "To al virtuous ladies in generall", and seven dedicatory pieces to Arabella Stuart, the first cousin of James I; Susan Bertie, the Countess of Kent; Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke; Lucy Russell, the Countess of Bedford; Margaret Clifford, the Countess of Cumberland; Katherine Howard, the Countess of Suffolk; Anne Sackville, the Countess of

Dorset), followed by a prose letter "To the Vertuous Reader". While ten of these dedications are poems in iambic pentameter and of differing stanza lengths, the one to her major patron, the Countess of Cumberland (who is also central to "The Description of Cooke-ham"), is in prose. The volume concludes on "The Description of Cooke-ham" and the final epistle "To the doubtfull Reader", in which Lanyer relates the title of her work back to a dream "many yeares before I had any intent to write" (Lanyer 1993, 139) the story of the Passion. The paratextual poems signify "a bid for patronage" (Greenstadt 2008, 68), directed most immediately at Margaret Clifford, the Countess of Cumberland, formerly the patron of Edmund Spenser and Samuel Daniel (Woods 2002, 126). They also situate Lanyer as a female poet in a community of women: the paratexts as well as the central poem itself "everywhere and continually project [. . .] a female subject or a female reader" (Grossman 1998, 2; ↗ 8 Renaissance Englishwomen).

Lanyer's description of the Passion of Christ is modelled closely on the Gospel of Matthew (26:30–28:10), "the only version which contains the warning of Pilate's wife" (Woods 1993, xxxvi), which figures strikingly in Lanyer's poem (Lanyer 1993, 84–90, ll. 751–912). The poem is entirely centred on women and told from a female perspective, including the women mourning at the foot of the cross. It also contains a defence of Eve, "an inverse or negative typology between Eve and the exclusively male perpetrators of the Crucifixion" (Grossman 1998, 3). While Eve was misguided, in Lanyer's version of the *querelle des femmes* tradition (Woods 2002, 131–32; Lobsien 2008, 266), those guilty of Christ's death knew what they were doing: "If one weake woman simply did offend, / This sinne of yours, hath no excuse, nor end" (Lanyer 1993, 87, ll. 831–32). Towards the end, the poem turns to the Countess of Cumberland and her virtues; the concluding section is a catalogue of biblical heroines and symbols of purity and faithfulness that are embodied by her (Woods 1993, xxxviii). The final lines contain Lanyer's acknowledgement of the Countess's influence on herself as a writer: "You are the Articke Starre that guides my hand, / All what I am, I rest at your command" (Lanyer 1993, 129, ll. 1839–40). The noble lady is presented as a source of inspiration for the poet, and, at the same time, also the one who "command[s]" her, thus evoking the notion of the Muses dictating a poem. Lanyer's attitude towards the noble patron as well as her awareness of the hierarchy existing between them is also expressed in the poem that ends the work.

"The Description of Cooke-ham" follows immediately upon these lines. It is an example of estate poetry, linked to the topic of patronage (Lobsien 2011, 48; cf. Lamb 2000), and was probably written between Feb. 25, 1609, when Anne Clifford became Countess of Dorset (her marriage is mentioned in the poem), and late 1610 (Woods 1993, xxv). It belongs to the genre of country house poetry and precedes at least the publication (if not the composition) of Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" (first published in 1616 and supposedly written "sometime before late 1612"; Woods 1993, xxxix; Beskin 2017, 527–28). Cookham was a royal estate in Berkshire, near Maidenhead, held by Margaret Clifford's brother, William Russell of Thornhaugh

(Lewalski 1991, 99); it remains a matter of debate whether Lanyer ever stayed at Cookham herself (Lobsien 2008, 267; Lewalski 1993, 216). She speaks of her writing the poem in terms of a "noble hest" (Lanyer 1993, 138, l. 207), which means that the composition was prompted by her patron's request.

2 Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

"The Description of Cooke-ham" is composed in 210 lines of rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter. The poem opens with a "Farewell" (repeated in line 7) of the speaker from the Cookham estate:

> Farewell (sweet *Cooke-ham*) where I first obtain'd
> Grace from that Grace where perfit Grace remain'd;
> And where the Muses gave their full consent,
> I should have powre the virtuous to content
> Where princely Palace will'd me to indite,
> The sacred Storie of the Soules delight.
> (Lanyer 1993, 130, ll. 1–6, italics original)

The speaker is present from the first line; she is "authorized" (Lobsien 2008, 269, my translation) both by the Muses and the estate, and has "powre" (l. 4) to write not only this poem but also, and perhaps even particularly, the "sacred Storie" (l. 6) of the Passion of Christ. These opening lines contain one of several (implicit) references to *Salve Deus* as a whole, where Cookham is identified as the place of its conception and inspiration (see also l. 12, 207). Beside the characterization and anthropomorphization of the estate, here expressed in the epithet "sweet" (l. 1, 7), another feature is highlighted in the second line: "Grace".

The polysemous word *grace* refers, firstly, to the favour the speaker has experienced; secondly, to the noble person who bestowed it; and, thirdly, to "god-given virtues" (see Lanyer 1993, 130n). It provides a link to the preceding dedications as well as to the main part of *Salve Deus,* where it is mentioned more than sixty times and with different denotations. As Woods notes (2002, 129):

> 'Grace' is one of the key terms throughout the volume. It not only signifies the relationship between patron and poet, and between God and humankind; it is also the term male poets traditionally applied to the blessings the inspiring woman bestowed on the lover. Lanyer reconnects these meanings – social, religious and Petrarchan – into a conflation of female virtue which mirrors Christ's sacrifice, orders the natural world, and leads to a woman's own poetic art.

She first uses *grace* in this sense in her dedicatory poem to Queen Anne, when she asks about Nature: "Why should not She now grace my barren Muse, / And in a Woman all defects excuse" (Lanyer 1993, 10, l. 155–56). The polysemous repetition of *grace* also indicates one of the overall stylistic features of Lanyer's poetry,

namely antanaclasis, the use of different denotations for the same words throughout, e.g. for "pleasure/s" (l. 10, 13, 15) and "pleasing" (l. 41, 65), and the production of and reflection on ambiguity.

In the following lines, the second "Farewell" that the speaker pronounces (l. 7), the person who was introduced as "Grace" in the opening lines is now allegorically referred to as "Virtue", to be eventually addressed as "(great Lady) Mistris of that Place"; it was she who asked the speaker to write the "work of Grace" (l. 12) now before the reader. At this point, it becomes clear that the speaker's is a double farewell, as she says farewell to the estate of Cookham, but she also once more, as it turns out, says farewell to the inhabitants who have already left it: the female company the speaker kept – Margaret and Anne Clifford – have departed. She thus also makes note of the fact that only women stayed at Cookham. The absence of any male company has been regarded as conspicuous (e.g. Grossman 2011, 138) and is one of the major points of difference between Lanyer's and, e.g., Jonson's country house poem "To Penshurst".

Lanyer's poem has been read in the tradition of country house poems by Martial (his Epigram III.58) and Horace (Epode II) as well as the first eclogue of Virgil's *Bucolica* (Lobsien 2008, 269 and 2011, 46–58), with the difference, however, that male speakers and men featuring in the poetry are replaced by women (Lewalski 1993, 235). While the country house poem is concerned with what have become the paradigmatic features of the genre, namely an "encomium of the owner of an estate and his family" (Lobsien 2011, 48) as well as the description of the house and its inhabitants (cf. Lewalski 1993), Lanyer deviates from the pattern in that the house is only mentioned briefly at the beginning (see also Beskin 2017, 529); she then focuses completely on the garden and surrounding nature of Cookham as well as the female company she kept there:

> The House receiv'd all ornaments to grace it,
> And would indure no foulnesse to deface it.
> The Walkes put on their summer Liveries,
> And all things else did hold like similies[.]
>
> (Lanyer 1993, 131, ll. 19–22)

From line 21 onwards, the speaker turns to nature and describes the influence of the female visitors' arrival: "Walkes" (l. 21), "Trees" (l. 23), "Streames" (l. 27), even "The little Birds" (l. 29; "pretty Birds" in l. 47) wish to appear at their best to welcome their guests, they "[s]et forth their beauties then to welcome [her]" (l. 34). The speaker, with her focus on nature, here also turns to the mode of remembrance and memory: the passage from the opening lines up until line 52 is written in the past tense, and the description is based on the speaker's memory of the place. The speaker then, however, in an almost metapoetic stance, refers to the *hic et nunc* of the poem's composition: "Now let me come unto that stately Tree" (l. 53).

The "Oake" (l. 55) that is subsequently described becomes central to the poem, both as a location and in its symbolic meaning. It is animated, if not anthropomorphized ("his fellowes" l. 55), and in a kind of (extra-)biblical typology related to the "Cedar" (l. 57) and the "Palme" (l. 61):

> That Oake that did in height his fellowes passe,
> As much as lofty trees, low growing grasse:
> Much like a comely Cedar streight and tall,
> Whose beauteous stature farre exceeded all:
> How often did you visite this faire tree,
> Which seeming joyfull in receiving thee,
> Would like a Palme tree spread his armes abroad,
> Desirous that you there should make abode[.]
>
> (ll. 55–62)

Cook links the tree to the biblical "Cedar" and "Palm tree" (Cook 2001, 111), and Beilin comments: "In their Biblical contexts, the cedar is the building material for the temple of God, and the palm is the symbol of spiritual victory" (1987, 204). This is expressed, for instance, in Psalm 92:12: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon." Cook furthermore points out that, in the Bible, the "tree [. . .] traditionally stands as an emblem of female chastity" (Cook 2001, 111; see also Grossman 2009, 325). The oak, in Lanyer's poem, even supersedes these trees, which goes together with the typological/figurative relationship of the oak tree and the cross (and of course the tree of life/knowledge; see Leimberg 1996, 34–36). The tree turns into an anthropomorphized protector of its visitor as a shield from the sun; moreover, "he" is "Joying his happinesse" (Lanyer 1993, l. 66) at the company. Moreover, the location of the tree serves as a vantage point into the landscape, from where "thirteene shires" (l. 73) can be seen. It is also a spot that triggers memories in that it makes the speaker remember her addressee Lady Clifford and the effect of the landscape on her:

> What was there then but gave you all content,
> While you the time in meditation spent,
> Of their Creators powre, which there you saw,
> In all his Creatures held a perfit Law;
> And in their beauties did you plaine descrie,
> His beauty, wisdom, grace, love, majestie.
> In these sweet woods how often did you walke,
> With Christ and the Apostles there to talke;
> Placing his holy Writ in some faire tree,
> To meditate what you therein did see[.]
>
> (ll. 75–84)

The observer becomes aware of the "Creators powre" (l. 77) in the surroundings of Cookham, and the oak is turned into a token that prepares further figurative and typological relations in the poem, especially whenever biblical places and events

are superimposed onto the estate. In this instance, it becomes obvious how typology is linked with the *compositio loci* of meditation (Cook 2001, 109–10) but also to what extent this is an inverted *compositio loci*: instead of merely putting herself or her addressee meditatively into the biblical landscape – she "mount[s.] [with Moses] his holy Hill" (l. 85), sings the psalms with David (l. 87), and feeds with Joseph the "pined brethren" (ll. 91–92) –, the speaker also puts the biblical scene into the remembered landscape that becomes re-*present*ed in her poem. "Placing" in this case is ambiguous: she could literally have been perambulating with a Bible in her hands and have put it down in the tree; at the same time, this is a superimposing of the Bible onto nature. Lanyer here alludes to the link between the Book of Nature and the Book of Books (see also Coch 2009, 387): the tree becomes part of Scripture and the bearer of Scripture.

The typology, as presented in this passage, provides a link to the overall context of *Salve Deus* where typology is introduced at several instances (e.g. in the references to "famous women [of] elder times", 114, l. 1465). Lanyer fleshes out the story of the passion in a fashion similar to, for example, Anne Lok's rendering of Psalm 51 or John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*: in "Spit in my face" (Donne 2010, 548–50), for example, the speaker uses a *compositio loci* immediately linked to the time and place of the crucifixion, and in his meditation "What if this present were the world's last night" (Donne 2010, 551–53) he views Jesus on the cross in his heart. But while the personae in Donne's poems question and seek their own salvation, Lanyer uses the passion in order to create a story of biblical women that try to persuade men and keep them from doing any injustice; her focus is on "male culpability in the death of Christ" (Woods 1993, xxxvii) rather than in a spiritual exercise of *imitatio Christi*.

From the memory triggered by the tree, the speaker moves on and turns to Anne, the daughter of Margaret Clifford and granddaughter of the second Earl of Bedford. Anne had recently been married into another great family, the Sackvilles, earls of Dorset (Lanyer 1993, 134n): "And that sweet Lady sprung from Cliffords race, / Of noble Bedfords blood, faire steame of Grace; / To honourable Dorset now espows'd" (ll. 93–95; "steame" in this case probably denotes a spelling variant of "stem" as in ancestry; see *OED*, "stem, n.[1]")). The thought of Anne reminds her of the "pure parts of her well framed mind" (l. 98). As Judith Dundas explains (1998/1999, 26): "The mind of the lady commemorated, as well as of the poet herself, is at the center of the poem, and memory is commemorated as the keeper of past experience." But it also triggers her regret over the separation from Anne: the speaker, in what follows, blames "Unconstant Fortune" (l. 103) for introducing social hierarchies and thus keeping her, due to her "lowe [...] frame" (l. 104), detached from her friends. Fortune and degree are thus immediately linked to one another (cf. Lobsien 2008, 272). Reminding herself, in a next step, of her station – "My Wit to weake to conster [understand] of the great" (l. 112) – she goes on to address "sweet

Memorie" (l. 117), which allows her to relive the time at Cookham. Memory, after all, creates mutuality but also distance by reminding her of her own position.

The departure of the ladies destroys this mutuality as well as the affinity to nature. The speaker remembers how, at their departure, a reverse effect on nature could be witnessed as compared to the earlier part of the poem when their arrival was described. This effect is highlighted by the reaction of the tree that, as has been noted, is the "only element of nature gendered male" (Lewalski 1993, 238; see, e.g., ll. 55–62) and hence "serves the Countess as a kind of ideal lover" (Lewalski 1993, 238) as well as provides "spiritual male companionship in Cookham's Edenic world" (239). The tree becomes "a mirror of human feeling" (Woods 1993, xl), and nature altogether immediately declines, falls into "griefe" (l. 128), "sad dismay" (l. 130) and "sorrow" (l. 132): "The vision collapses and the poem modulates into lament" (Cook 2001, 113), into an "elegiac tone" (Lewalski 1991, 104), as the landscape develops from "*locus amoenus* [. . .] to a *locus horribilis*" (Noble 2015, 99). This change has, in retrospect, been anticipated in the opening lines of the poem: when the speaker asks the "great Lady" (l. 11) to "Vouchsafe to thinke upon those pleasures past" (l. 13), she refers to them as "fleeting worldly Joyes that could not last" (l. 14), as "dimme shadowes of celestiall pleasures" (l. 15). Cookham, it turns out is indeed an earthly version of paradise, but one that is subject to change and, hence, only a shadow. The effect on nature of the ladies' departure has moreover been associated with the myth of Persephone: "In mythic terms, Margaret Clifford is so closely associated with aspects of nature at Cookham that she seems virtually a Persephone whose arrivals and departures bring the seasons and their changes" (Lewalski 1989, 267).

> The trees that were so glorious in our view,
> Forsooke both flowres and fruit, when once they knew
> Of your depart, their very leaves did wither,
> Changing their colours as they grewe together.
> But when they saw this had no powre to stay you,
> They often wept, though speechlesse, could not pray you[].
>
> (ll. 133–38)

Nature – i.e. the natural environment of Cookham – is once again anthropomorphized and, simultaneously, appears to reflect the speaker's feelings at the departure of her friends. The trees are imbued with perception, knowledge and emotion, albeit lacking the power of speech to make themselves heard. And while it is stated that the trees have "no powre to stay" the visitors (l. 137), it is also made clear that the ladies lack the power to stay: their "occasions" called them "so away" (l. 147).

Although Herz argues that the "emphasis of this poem remains on the leave-taking" (Herz 1997, 127), this does not seem to be the point; rather, the speaker's emphasis lies once more on memory, as even nature now partakes of it. Nature's "noble Memory" (l. 155) is instigated by the Countess herself, who takes leave from

the “sad creatures” (l. 152) and rewards each for its company during her stay. The tree mentioned earlier in the poem becomes central as it holds a special significance also for Anne, who wandered there before she was married (“then a virgin faire” l. 160). While she takes the speaker by the hand, it is the tree which Anne bestows with a kiss:

> And with a chaste, yet loving kisse tooke leave,
> Of which sweet kisse I did it soone bereave:
> Scorning a sencelesse creature should possesse
> So rare a favour, so great happinesse.
> No other kisse it could receive from me,
> For feare to give backe what I tooke of thee[.]
> (ll. 165–70)

Anne’s action of kissing the tree sparks the speaker’s jealousy, who subsequently steals it back from it and is afraid to kiss the tree afterwards, lest it should receive the kiss back again. This passage not only reads like an allusion to the encounter sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the two lovers famously speak about the exchange of kisses (“Give me my sin again”, 1.5.106); moreover, in a subtle biblical allusion, similar to the inverted *compositio loci* mentioned above, “[b]y kissing the tree and reading under its shade”, the speaker “becomes a second Eve. Stealing from the tree – now a forbidden kiss in place of the forbidden fruit – [she] is, like Eve, guilty of too much love and of the desire for knowledge” (Uman 2012, 64; see also DiPasquale 2008). And yet, it is the figure of Eve who, in the main poem of *Salve Deus*, is excused, in “Eves Apologie”:

> Our Mother *Eve*, who tasted of the Tree,
> Giving to *Adam* what shee held most deare,
> Was simply good, and had no powre to see,
> The after-comming harme did not appeare[.]
> (*Salve Deus* ll. 763–66, italics original)

Eve’s only fault indeed was “too much love” (l. 801). By creating a similar environment and alluding to Cookham as a place that resembles an earthly paradise as well as by making a tree central to the poem and turning it into a place of sin, the speaker, based on the typology as introduced into the poem, implicitly excuses herself and concludes: “Yet this great wrong I never could repent” (l. 174). Just like Eve, she implies, she acted out of “too much love.”

Nature’s decline – as described towards the ending of the poem – can be associated with the seasonal cycle, which is also mirrored in the structure of the poem, when the speaker in the final lines returns to a “farewell”:

> This last farewell to *Cooke-ham* here I give,
> When I am dead thy name in this may live,
> Wherein I have perform’d her noble hest,
> Whose virtues lodge in my unworthy breast,
> And ever shall, so long as life remaines,
> Tying my heart to her by those rich chaines.
>
> (ll. 205–10)

Lanyer has her poem end on a panegyric of her patron(s) – following upon her bewailing the “diffrence [sic] [. . .] in degree” (l. 106) and blaming “Fortune” (l. 176) for not permitting a continued relationship (Markidou 2011, 15–16) nor equality between them. She highlights her own unworthiness and her ongoing faithfulness by (topically) referring to her “unworthy breast” (l. 208). But apart from the conventional modesty, she also invokes the theme of immortality through poetry, thus creating a possible link to Shakespeare’s sonnets. In a fashion similar to sonnet 18, she concludes that “thy name in *this* may live” (l. 206, emphasis added). This self-referential remark reads like a comment on the ability of her poetry to make her addressee (and, by implication, herself) immortal. Poetry itself becomes memory. Thus, while “Lanyer portrays Cookham as a place without men, a sort of feminine academy, and evokes the departure of the spirit of the place, when the women disperse” (Grossman 2009, 325; cf. Lewalski 1991, 104–06), she also finds a means to hold on to that memory that, concurrently, expresses a certain one-sidedness of this faithfulness and loyalty. Eventually, it turns out that the active part in the relationship lies exclusively with the speaker.

3 Aesthetics: Literary Strategies

The final lines of Lanyer’s “The Description of Cooke-ham” are expressive of a more general issue in the poem of proximity and distance, mostly articulated by her use of pronouns. Not only does the speaker employ the second-person pronoun, especially “you”, for a number of different referents that constantly shift; she also wavers between “you”, the more intimate “thou” and “thee”, as well as “her” to refer to the Countess. “You” in the poem may, accordingly, refer to the ladies (in the plural as well as the singular, e.g. l. 11), to “Memory” (l. 117, where it is even addressed as “thou”) as well as the house and estate: “And you sweet Cooke-ham, whom these Ladies leave, / I now must tell the griefe you did conceave / At their departure” (ll. 127–29). This agrees overall with the presentation of animate nature, e.g. the anthropomorphized tree, flowers, brooks etc., and even an animate house that “cast off each garment that might grace it” (l. 201) at the departure of its mistress, “Putting on Dust and Cobwebs to deface it” (l. 102). The Countess herself is first addressed with “you” – “Yet you (great Lady) Mistris of that Place” (l. 11) – then with the more familiar “thee” (l. 34); in the final lines, the speaker moves from the

intimate “thy name” (l. 206) to the distancing “her noble hest” (l. 207); similarly, the heart is tied “to *her* by those rich chaines” (l. 210, my emphasis). As Noble comments (2015, 104): “There is also an interesting shift in the envoy from referring to Margaret in the second person to the third person. No longer the ‘you’ of the poem she is, in this final act of ironic distancing, ‘her’.” Unsure of her own status in the relationship, the speaker “wavers between distance and an uneasy, almost startling intimacy whose foundations and history she appears to invent as she goes along” (Lobsien 2011, 50); she appears to be torn between “social difference and the desire for proximity” (50), a conflict that is expressed in the shifting between pronouns throughout the poem.

The speaker’s reference to “her noble hest” (l. 207), i.e. the Countess’s bidding to write the poem, can, moreover, be read as a nod back to the opening lines, where she notes that it was the Countess’s “desires” from which “did spring this worke of Grace” (l. 12). The Countess, accordingly, turns into a source of inspiration for the poem and becomes part of a co-creative partnership with the poet, in addition to the influence by biblical texts and their translations, voiced by Lanyer, for example, in her dedicatory poem to Mary Sidney (Uman 2012; Pearson 1997). She refers to the inspiration by her principal dedicatee also in the concluding lines of the main poem of *Salve Deus*.

> Loe Madame, heere you take a view of those,
> Whose worthy steps you doe desire to tread,
> Deckt in those colours which our Saviour chose;
> The purest colours both of White and Red[.]
> . . . .
> Whose excellence hath rais’d my sprites to write,
> Of what my thoughts could hardly apprehend;
> Your rarest Virtues did my soule delight,
> Great Ladie of my heart: I must commend
> You that appeare so faire in all mens sight:
> On your Deserts my Muses doe attend:
> You are the Articke Starre that guides my hand,
> All what I am, I rest at your command.
>
> (*Salve Deus* ll. 1825–40)

The Countess is asked to participate in an *imitatio Christi* (↗ 7 Literature and Religion) as well as an imitation of the saints described in the poem. Moreover, her inspirational force is once more foregrounded and creates a link to the following country house poem. *Salve Deus* comes full circle here as Lanyer opens it with the address “To thee great Countesse now I will applie / My Pen, to write thy never dying fame” (ll. 9–10); just like “The Description of Cooke-ham” comes full circle with its conclusion of the seasonal cycle and the creation of immortality through poetry. In these lines, Lanyer’s poem is turned into a “sororal scene of literary collaboration” (Rogers 2000, 436); the ambiguous “I rest at your command” (l. 1840),

however, at the same time highlights her ambivalent attitude towards the Countess's behaviour and the difference in their station that she expresses throughout: not only does she move from "thee" (l. 9) to "you" at the poem's conclusion but, as soon as her mistress commands it, she will "rest" and write no more.

4 Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

Almost nothing is known about the reception of Lanyer's work at the time of publication. Most critics assume that her bid for patronage was unsuccessful, since no records survive on how her poem was received (see, e.g., Lewalski 1991; Grossman 2009, 317). The work was then forgotten, only to reemerge in the twentieth century with Barbara Lewalski and A. L. Rowse, who rediscovered Aemilia Lanyer and *Salve Deus* in the 1970s and 1980s, albeit following different agendas. Rowse published *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* – in his edition the book's title *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* is relegated to a subtitle (cf. Lanier 1978) – under the assumption that he had finally identified the woman addressed by Shakespeare in the second half of his sonnets. Lewalski, in contrast, takes a feminist stance in her publications on Lanyer (see, e.g., Lewalski 1985), and speaks, for instance, of a "feminist conceptual frame" (Lewalski 1993, 213) of Lanyer's poem: "By publishing *Salve Deus* [. . .], a collection of poems about, and dedicated to, women of noble and royal birth, Lanyer openly staked her claim as a professional poet seeking patronage in a public forum" (Beskin 2017, 541–42). Lanyer has since then been added to the literary canon, along with other female authors of the early modern period (see Grossman 1998, 2009 and 2011), and extracts from *Salve Deus* are now regularly taught in universities, particularly "The Description of Cooke-ham."

While Rowse, especially since the publication of Woods's edition (1993; see also Purkiss 1994, xxxi), is no longer considered in approaches to Lanyer's poetry, the gender perspective has prevailed. The predominant focus in the critical literature is on Lanyer's representation of women, and *Salve Deus* has, accordingly, been read as "a defense and celebration of the enduring community of good women that reaches from Eve to contemporary Jacobean patronesses" (Lewalski 1993, 213) and "a comprehensive Book of Good Women" (218). As Lewalski notes, *Salve Deus* represents "in a quite unexpected form a feminist defense and celebration of women and of Lanyer as woman poet" (218). As a result of this approach, the book has been read, in a somewhat anachronistic fashion that links the critics' concern with Lanyer's, as making "religious devotion and feminism" its "unifying themes and concerns" (Lewalski 1985, 207). Feminist approaches have accordingly taken into account the female company as a common denominator that links the poem as a whole and its individual parts, including the dedicatory paratexts. Lanyer's "[p] ositioning [her]self as part of a community of Christian women [. . .] [is hence]

a strategy of female self-authorization" (Zwierlein 2008, 83), an aspect also stressed by Purkiss (1994).

The gender perspective has been pursued further by Marshall Grossman (1998 and 2011), with an emphasis on the rediscovery of Lanyer (and other Renaissance women writers) and its effect on the canon. Other feminist readings include DiPasquale – who even speaks of a "gynocentric ecclesiology" (2008, 106) in Lanyer (she does, however, not consider "The Description of Cooke-ham") –, McGrath (1992) and Busfield (2015). Markidou (2011) provides a summary of feminist approaches to Lanyer and her work up until 2011. Purkiss (1994, xxxiv) refers to the "innovative structure" of *Salve Deus*, which, in her opinion, "represents a woman writer's hesitant approach to resolving the difficulties with which humanist discourses on virtue confront the female writer." She agrees with Hutson (1992) in the view that Lanyer's poem is not so much about the link between patronage and religion but rather offers "a series of stories" that are all concerned with the interpretation of human actions and texts (Purkiss 1994, xxxiv; cf. Hutson 1992). She hence comes to the conclusion that "The Description of Cooke-ham" itself "becomes a final act of interpretation":

> Just as the women of Jerusalem's correct reading of Christ is their virtue, so the landscape's reading of the Clifford women is its virtue and ultimately theirs, since its virtue derives from them. This [. . .] prefigures the development of the country-house poem as a means of representing the interaction between virtuous reading and virtuous writing. Often read in isolation, 'To Cookeham' [sic] makes sense in the light of the interpretive procedures sketched by Lanyer in the remainder of the volume. (Purkiss 1994, xxxvi)

The link to other country house poetry and the particularly female stance in Lanyer's poem is often addressed in comparisons to Jonson's "To Penshurst." Grossman, for instance, argues that Jonson's poem "helps to make visible how deeply implicated [it] is in assumptions about land tenure and inheritance from which Lanyer is excluded by gender" (2011, 130). This aspect is in particular highlighted in the representation of trees: in Jonson, trees "bind the generations to the soil and mark the passage of time", whereas in Lanyer the tree "serves as a focal point for feminine companionship and endeavor" but becomes "*insignificant* in their absence" (2011, 139, emphasis original). Grossman also refers to Coiro (1993) and Lewalski (1993) in this context. And Coch (2009, 390) argues that, by embedding her reflections on social differences in a country house poem, Lanyer "employs garden imagery to set out ideas of hierarchical relationships between women."

Markidou (2011, 6) notes a shift in critical attention "from the debate over whether, and to what extent, Lanyer's poetry is driven by a feminist agenda to her complex response to patronage relationships and social inequalities." Bennett, in a similar vein, links the gender perspective to a rhetorical reading, thus positioning herself against the commonly held assumption that rhetorical skill is restricted to an aristocratic upbringing (cf. Bennett 2004, 172–73; she does not mention "The Description of Cooke-

ham”); in this, however, she overlooks the fact that Lanyer spent a period during her youth with Susan Bertie, the Countess of Kent, and was invited to a royal party at Bisham, in the vicinity of Cookham (cf. Prior 2003). These readings are indicative of a move away from the religious focus of the gender perspective to a more political one. Ng reads Lanyer’s poem in the “broader context of the Stuart court’s political culture” (Ng 2000, 434): in her view, literary patronage was embedded in discourses of religious devotion and secular language of patronage, but, because of feminist readings, “class tensions within the poem” have been overlooked (434; on class tensions, see also Woods 2002, 133). Beilin (1987, 181) links the perspectives in that she notes: “Lanyer’s devoted praise of women, from her apology for Eve to her encomia for the Countess of Cumberland, does not derive solely from anger or even a desire for justice. Rather, it evolves from her own piety and her poetic calling as a Christian visionary who yearns for a world greatly different from the one she knows.” McGrath, on the contrary, speaks of “relational feminism”, “a consciousness of women’s rights and solidarity in the face of their oppression of male power” (1992, 333) that, however, does not have an “agenda for political change” (334).

Verena Lobsien, with a focus on “topological poetics” in country house poetry (Lobsien 2011, 42), explains that “country-house poetry is patronage poetry” (Lobsien 2011, 48), a view that can be linked to a number of comparisons of Lanyer’s poems, especially “The Description of Cooke-ham”, to Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst”, for example by Lewalski (1993), Pohl (2003), and Grossman (2009). Lewalski foregrounds how Jonson “celebrates patriarchy” (1998, 235) and “presents Penshurst as an integral part of the larger society as well as an idealized microcosm of it”, including an “idealized traditional version of the aristocratic lady’s role” (236). In contrast to this presentation, Lanyer “displays the real superimposed upon the ideal, affording a very different representation of the lady’s situation” (237); this is why, according to Lewalski, the house is hardly mentioned at all (ibid.). In her view, the ending represents the sharpest contrast to Jonson as permanence in “To Penhurst” is juxtaposed with the “destruction of an idyllic place when its lady departs” (1993, 240).

Cook, alternatively, suggests a move of critical literature away from the generic context of the country house poem towards devotional poetry. In his view, the reading of “The Description of Cooke-ham” as a country house poem “contributed to a failure to recognize this remarkable text’s polyphonic richness” (Cook 2001, 105); to him, the landscape is presented as “contemplative opportunity” (106). Taking up the claimed “polyphonic richness”, Beilin and Stapleton comment, more or less extensively, on the mix of genres in Lanyer’s poem (Beilin 1987, 206–207; cf. Stapleton 2012). The latter are rare examples of a stylistic and formal analysis of the poem.

Recently, two further strands of criticism have evolved with regard to Lanyer’s *Salve Deus* more generally and “The Description of Cooke-ham” in particular. Especially the latter has been read against the background of queer theory and ecocriticism. Amy Greenstadt, for example, claims that “the oak tree can usefully [. . .] be compared to a dildo” (2008, 76). At the same time, she admits that “any

conclusions one might draw from [the poem] about early women's sexual interactions must remain highly speculative" (68). She bases her argument on an underlying "sexualized dynamic between female writer and reader mediated by a series of masculine objects, including the figure of Christ himself" (74). Goldberg earlier argued in favour of a homoerotic relationship between Lanyer and her patron, Margaret Clifford (Goldberg 1997, 39–41); DiPasquale, in a similar vein, discusses "Lanyer's artful and natural homoerotics" (2008, 195).

Ecocritical readings have likewise become popular and more widespread. Beskin offers an ecomaterialist reading in that she combines biological and mythological perspectives (Beskin 2017, 524). Her focus is on the birds mentioned in "The Description of Cooke-ham" that, in her view, help both Lanyer and Clifford generate authority. Her reading is based on the assumption that the "poem simultaneously connects the intrinsic precariousness of Lanyer's inferior social standing with Cookeham's material decline" (Beskin 2017, 525). The comparison of women and birds was topical during the early modern period, and Lanyer writes herself into the tradition of interspecies friendships (530–32). Eventually, "access to Cookeham's rich beauty is everywhere conditioned by (or predicated upon) a patronage system that proves materially unsustainable and leads to ecological disaster" (551). As early as in the 1980s, Beilin commented on how, in Lanyer's poem, "Nature is the source of feminine Art" (Beilin 1987, 189). Uman (2012) similarly focuses on nature as a source of inspiration, and Noble claims that Lanyer uses "imagery already freighted with environmental and cultural significance to draw an analogy between the female speaker and the literal landscape of Cookham that the imagery suggests" (2015, 99). Lanyer's is "a poetics of ecological awareness deeply critical of existing hierarchical systems that exploit both people and the environment" (99). To her, in "The Description of Cooke-ham", "ecological and social concerns [...] are inextricably linked" (100). This shows how even more recent approaches to the text, such as queer and ecocritical readings, always return to the issue of socio-political interpretations and foreground the genre of patronage poetry, one of the linking elements of this thematically rich poem.

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